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Steven Paulson

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**“MY WIFE, WE HAVE NOT YET COME TO THE END OF ALL OUR TRIAL, BUT A
MEASURELESS LABOR YET”:
THE LUTHERAN ARGUMENT IN COLLEGES**

Steven Paulson

I remember hearing a professor tell our class that Homer's Odyssey was a voyage of self-discovery like the one on which we were to embark. But these days I think less of the voyage of discovery and more about the unreasonable patience of Penelope:

She, the godly woman, told how much she endured in the halls; To look upon the destructive throng of the suitors; Who on her account had slaughtered oxen and godly sheep in numbers, and much wine had been drawn off from the jars. And Zeus-born Odysseus told of the many cares he had brought upon men, and the many he had suffered himself in his woe. He told them all, and she enjoyed hearing, nor did sleep fall upon her eyelids before he told it all (XXIII, 301-309).

Such was the joy of his return, but she seems never to have questioned his identity or her own, and knew what Odysseus could not see. The question of finding one's own identity is hard enough, but the complexity increases manyfold when identifying a tradition that is carried through time, often lumberlingly, by institutions like colleges. It seems right to me, then, that Dr. Bouman would consider the Lutheran tradition and its role at a university in light of Alasdair MacIntyre's description:

When an institution--a university, say, or a farm, or a hospital--is the bearer of a tradition of practice or practices, its common life will be partly, but in a centrally important way, constituted by a continuous argument as to what a university is and ought to be or what good farming is or what good medicine is. Traditions, when vital, embody continuities of conflict...A living tradition then is an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition (206-7).

There are many questions we might ask about Lutheran identity in light of this, but two in particular stand out. What *is* the tradition of a Lutheran college? And perhaps more to the point today, is it a *living* one? Dr. Bouman's introduction (numbers down, Garrison Keillor making jokes) causes me to wonder if this is more the making of "a continuous argument" or the reading of a eulogy for an old, dead friend. Nevertheless, I would like to consider the

Lutheran liberal arts college as a "continuous argument," but for what, and against what?

Bouman suggests we can identify this argument by culling "principles" from the intellectual history of theology, and in this way express the "goods which constitute that tradition." His principles are five: a non-oppressive authority for the Bible, the Triune identity of God (Catholicism), that a person's meaning comes through faith, and is perhaps best if the faith is in Jesus (evangelical), that God does something to humans in the stuff of the world and not outside it, and that the world is good and humans should behave accordingly. These are impressive and no doubt descriptive of "Lutheran identity" in some way. I think what is most impressive about Dr. Bouman's speech is the remarkable range that allows us to see the Lutheran argument "extended in history," as MacIntyre had it. He takes us from Luther's nailing of the theses to the Confessions, the scholasticism of Lutheranism, Kant and up to today. It is a glorious romp!

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Along the way he gives us many interesting arguments among Lutherans, and Christians generally, which raise questions for a Lutheran college. For example, is he correct that by falsely adopting an oppressive authority of the Bible-- apart from its use as gospel--Lutherans marginalized theology in the academy? Perhaps so. Yet as his own illustration of a better use of the Bible shows, when one comes to an issue like homosexuality there appears only to be increased friction today with "no resolution of this debate on the horizon." I ask myself, if this is the result of "non-oppressive" use of the Bible, why would anyone at a university bother to pick it up, except to be contentious? Is this really an example of what is meant by the Lutheran "argument," the increase of argumentativeness with no resolution on the horizon? It sounds too much like my students who mistake an argument for the mere assertion of various opinions. Shouldn't we rather be more interested in

what Luther himself meant when he said that it would have been better that the gospel had never been written at all, but that sad necessity compelled it--that the Bible is precisely for proclamation of God's own word resulting in death and new life? Shouldn't we rather become aware that this proclamation was as shocking in a world without modern scientific consciousness as it is today? Is this not the benefit of modern science and philosophy to remove those matters that are not the offense of the gospel, such as the miracles of healing a blind man, so that the real offense of Christ can be heard?

In this way I am glad to have Dr. Bouman rehearse the argument for what Lutherans have considered "goods." It allows me as a teacher in a Lutheran college to start asking the right questions. But what I want to see more than anything else is the earlier part of MacIntyre's description: "Traditions, when vital, embody continuities of conflict," and "a living tradition then is an historically extended, socially embodied argument..." For it seems to me that these are the real questions most universities have. Where are the "continuities of conflict," and how is the tradition extended in history to be "socially embodied"? We want to know if the tradition is alive, or if it should simply be recorded for posterity. The appearance of a journal like this one, and gatherings for discussions about the tradition are signs of life, but simultaneously they are signs of the lack of vitality and the end of a social embodiment to carry the argument forward. There may be life, but the pulse is feint.

I believe that what I am left with in Dr. Bouman's review of Lutheran principles is an argument for the catholicity of Lutheranism. This is no doubt true. That Lutherans are catholic in some sense is no doubt an important argument for Lutherans, especially in this age of ecumenical theology. I must then ask what he means by this for a Lutheran liberal arts college. Does this mean, as is often argued, that there is no longer a distinctiveness to *Lutherans*, or should not be? That what we need now is a "nondenominational Christian" university, or a college that is "open" to religion? Or perhaps the thought may be that it was a distinctive theological tradition once, but only temporarily, and its time is past. Lutheranism, so that argument goes, is meant to self-destruct when its mission is complete, and that time is now. How must we reconfigure then? Perhaps Dr. Bouman would have us think that Lutherans should be distinguished from non-Catholics who do not believe in the principle of sacramentality, but should not be distinguished from sacramental Catholics. Here the question just starts to get interesting for a university. For if there is a distinction on the sacramental line, or on the Christian line, or a distinction anywhere on theological grounds amid America's

smorgasbord of religions, what should this mean in terms of the "socially embodied," nature of the Lutheran argument? This is always where the matter becomes painful in universities, because it involves direct choices. Who should be hired. Who should be given tenure? What departments should be given "required" classes? Is the Lutheran tradition, or the Catholic tradition, or the Christian tradition to be given what is commonly called "privileged status," at one of these universities? If so, then doesn't this destroy the notion of free inquiry?

It seems to me when I contemplate what Bouman wants for a Lutheran university it is to say that if at times the Lutheran tradition was opposed to science, it should not now be, and if at times the Lutheran tradition was opposed to Catholics it should not now be. Its proper argument is against false identifications of "god" in the world, and for the identity of the Triune God revealed in Jesus Christ; as he says, "All justification of existence is by faith. The only appropriate question is, by faith in what?" Yet why at this point do the "continuities of conflict" seem to disappear in a conclusion that is so holistic and inclusive (beloved words in academia) that it becomes impossible to see where the rub is? There is, for example much more of a rub that people feel, it seems to me, between church and university than Bouman expects when he says that the church-related college is not only an instance of the church teaching, but also of the church learning. What church? A non-denominational one? The true catholic church? But is this embodied, and if so in what way? And don't the Lutherans have something to say about the church to help here? Are all the universities' teachers the church's teachers? Or only those who identify themselves as Lutheran, or generally "Christian?" Or only, God help us, those in the religion department?

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Finally, after appreciating the skill and perception that Bouman brings to the task of identifying "principles" of Lutheranism, this makes me think that the real "continuities in conflict" that mark this tradition are glossed over. What marks this tradition is a praxis that seems embarrassingly small and foolish: "but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles" (I Cor. 1:23). This action comes into direct conflict with the world and is not a kind of pleasant relationship of service and inquiry in continuity with it. The *practice*, the *deed*, the *doing* which

marks a Lutheran is proclamation, which is embodied socially by a speaker and hearer and the material means of communication through persons and sacraments. A Lutheran finally is one who says and does something to another to end the search for life inside the law and gives it outside through hearing Christ's word. The thing which colleges and universities (as socially embodied arguments) don't like, and can't like, is that this truth is given outside of them. That means that a Lutheran college or university would have to admit that the search for truth, begun within its walls, must end outside them--that one cannot control this either by forcing a person into faith or by forcing a person out of it. Reason, though it may be its own penultimate goal, cannot be its own final goal. And this is just the beginning of the "continuities of conflict" a truly Lutheran practice would raise within an academic institution whose primary shape is given by the enlightenment.

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Why don't we conflict with the common intellectual experience like a good living tradition should? Are we afraid that Penelope won't wait for us or recognize us in our disguise, and that we will lose whatever scraps of identity we have left?
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But let us return to our starting point. Isn't this sort of continuity of *conflict* what makes a tradition live? Isn't that what MacIntyre must mean by an argument that actually makes people behave and think differently, and perhaps even act counter-culturally? Perhaps Lutheran institutions have been too cautious and even frightened about what will happen if they really talk about what makes for truth, freedom and faith: proclamation. Why don't we conflict with the common intellectual experience like a good living tradition should? Are we afraid that Penelope won't wait for us, or recognize us in our disguise, and that we will lose whatever scraps of identity we have left? Why not assume what the *praxis* of proclamation assumes, that God is a trinity of persons who share one Holy Spirit, that God is not "whatever does not change," but the one who shares this Holy Spirit with those who are not God, that humans are not free but bound outside God's declaration, that the body is not a prison of the spirit, that the earth groans under sin and awaits relief, and that economy is not all there is to human polity! In other words, why not make the argument that there are good reasons for physical education and health at Lutheran institutions which may not fit with a society obsessed with body for the wrong reasons, that music proclaims something and does not merely entertain, that the political arts are more than the economic, that the economic

cannot be excluded lest we make differences again between male and female, slave and free? Why not float the question that if this Lutheran *praxis* is anything, then law is not merely a game of outwitting an opponent but has eternal consequences, because it is God's own will? Why not assert that though human beings construct certain realities, God is not a ghost in a machine or reduced to the mere play of metaphors, but uses human words to kill and make alive, that the present is not the only reality--trapping us with no exit, that fate is not all so grab it with gusto.

Are we afraid as educators to tell our students that if the proclamation Lutherans talk about would have any truth, then there would be "yes" and "no" in this world? Are we afraid to say that words may have meaning, that arguments can change a person and persuade the world but that some may be better and others worse, in fact some right and others wrong? Are we afraid that this is not neutral enough, or that it lacks pluralism? Perhaps some are correct in thinking that a new, post-modern situation enhances the possibilities of the conflict raised by Lutherans to live and thrive, but I suspect this will not be the help some hope for. The problem for Lutherans is not the Enlightenment, or even Post-Modernism, but what Paul called the "old Adam" (the old person), the Odysseus who slays all suitors and is still unsure of his identity. The problem for any of us, especially in a university, is that truth is made outside the walls of the institution and its continuing argument in a *praxis* which Lutherans call proclamation, which brings a person to an end in the law and raises a new person by word of the gospel. But the problem is even more complex than that, for the Lutheran understands precisely that this is not the *praxis* of merely an individual or an institution like a college or church, and is rather the *praxis* of God, the Father speaking the Word, his Son, which makes new people in its hearing by their Spirit. It is clear to me that an institution, however embodied, can't do that by following "principles," but it would be of the greatest worth to have an institution engaging its students in all the great arguments about truth and identity that knows at least that much. To know that one does not know has in the past been considered something, after all. If that actually happened, we might have a school to which our young Odysseus' might profitably be sent! Meanwhile, Penelope should put off other suitors, even if it doesn't look likely he'll return.

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Steven Paulson is Associate Professor of Religion at Concordia College.
